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ABSTRACT

This report examines the dimensions of transfer problems in the British Columbia college system from a number of perspectives. For the last 3 years, in an annual student outcomes survey, 16 percent of students have reported that they had transfer problems. For the receiving institutions, the challenge of including clear entry points for transfer students, in innovative and unique degrees, cannot be overstated. Lack of consultation or advance warning regarding changes in curriculum or in program requirements can create serious difficulties for sending institutions and their students, especially when more than one receiving institution is making those changes. Understanding the "system" is one of the difficulties students have related. Many students expect a coordinated system of postsecondary education (like the K-12 system) where institutions will have similar regulations, curricula, programs, etc. A relatively new problem for the system relates to the changing expectation of students and the public about what ought to be transferable. Lack of capacity in the system to accommodate students in degree programs can create another problem. Accrediting agencies external to institutions have, in many cases, the power to set curricular requirements which can affect transfer relationships between institutions. Overall, the problems related to transfer fall into four categories: complexity, communication, administration, and articulation. (JA)

Special Report

APRIL 1999

BRITISH COLUMBIA COUNCIL ON ADMISSIONS & TRANSFER



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Transfer: What's the Problem?

A Special Report from the Transfer Innovations Committee

Is credit transfer in B.C. relatively painless and straightforward, or is it fraught with problems and difficulties? Anecdotal evidence that some students encounter frustrations and roadblocks in transferring from one institution in B.C. to another includes stories of having to repeat courses they have already taken, losing credits, or being denied access to chosen programs. Do these stories reflect the reality of transfer for most students? And how do we distinguish between "real" and "perceived" problems?

A student denied credit for a vocational course upon transfer to a university may feel aggrieved, not understanding that the course was not transferable. From an institutional perspective, this is a "perceived" rather than a "real" problem. It is tempting to dismiss such problems as peripheral to our main concern of identifying and fixing the real problems. However, adopting a narrow definition of what constitutes a real problem (for example, being denied credit for a course which is clearly documented as transferable in the transfer guide) risks a failure to understand what may eventually erode public confidence in the transfer system.

But it is vital that the system responds appropriately to address "real" problems. Transfer is central to our post-secondary system. Each year in B.C. over 5000 students transfer over 60,000 courses to the three largest universities alone. The economic implication of some students repeating courses or credits is significant. Since many of these students were unable to enter university directly, due to academic, monetary or geographical reasons, transfer

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allows institutions to provide access and opportunity. A well-integrated and smoothly operating transfer process is critical to the overall health of our post-secondary system.

This report examines the dimensions of transfer problems in the B.C. post-secondary system from a number of perspectives. While there are occasional references to solutions to those problems, this paper does not describe in detail improvements currently undertaken

to address these problems. Details of these initiatives are located in various documents on the Council's website: www.bccat.bc.ca

Research on Transfer in B.C.

In the last five years the Council has commissioned many studies on aspects of the B.C. transfer system. The studies confirm that the transfer system is working well, but they also provide insights into both the extent of transfer problems, and their possible causes. These reports are available on the Council's website. Findings include:

- For the last three years, in answer to a question about transfer problems in the annual *Former College Student Outcomes Survey*, 16% of students have reported that they had transfer problems. Of these, almost half said that their original course or program was "not designed for transfer."
- An assessment of individual transcripts of college students who have transferred to UBC indicates that students transfer 85% of the credits they earn at college. Most credits are lost because a course

is not articulated, or is allocated more credits at the college than at UBC.

- BCCAT's Task Force on Standards and Processes has documented problems with the *administrative processes* associated with inter-institutional transfer.
- In a 1997 survey of advisors at colleges and universities in B.C. respondents rated the transfer system as good or very good, and noted a very small percentage of "real" or "major" transfer problems.
- The same advisors rated students' knowledge and understanding of the transfer system as fair or poor.
- Interviews with students reveal that many students in transfer programs appear to adopt an uninformed and passive approach to the transfer process. Others however, report finding the process frustrating and overly complicated; they recount difficulty accessing or understanding relevant materials.
- Interviews with students *after* transfer reveal that most found the process relatively problem-free, and were glad they had chosen a transfer route.
- Over fifty responses received during the Block Transfer consultation process related perceptions of transfer issues from many points of views.
- Student profiles undertaken by SFU, UVic and UBC indicate that transfer students do well academically, graduating at rates and with grades comparable to other students.

An examination of these reports and others allows us to view transfer problems from several perspectives.

The Institutional Perspective

Receiving Institutions:

Receiving institutions recognize the transfer credits and confer the eventual credential. They must assure themselves that transfer students are arriving well prepared for the work they will undertake. Where they have observed a consistent pattern of under-prepared students, they have adopted various strategies to address this problem. However, strategies such as adding prerequisites, limiting enrollment or recalibrating transfer students' grades are likely to cause resentment in the sending institutions and in transfer students and may result in accusations of unfairness.

All institutions, established and emerging, are under pressure to develop new and unique degrees. The challenge of including clear entry points for transfer students, in innovative and unique degrees, cannot be overstated.

As well as developing new programs, all institutions must overhaul curriculum periodically to keep up with developments in the field. Receiving institutions have occasionally failed to recognize the impact this will have on sending institutions, or have been insensitive to the need to provide lead time for adaptation to change. Even where adequate warning of change has been given, sending institutions cannot always respond within the implementation timeframe. Smoothing the way for acceptance of and adaptation to curricular change by other institutions can drain resources of the department undertaking the revisions, and can delay implementation of needed change.

Sending Institutions:

Ten years ago the system included 23 public post-secondary institutions of which four granted degrees. Now there are 28 public post-secondary institutions of which fourteen grant degrees. B.C. students are fortunate that the range and choice of available degree options has exploded.

This expansion, however, has increased the complexity of the task of sending institutions. They must try to align their curricula to that of several receiving institutions, or risk disadvantaging their students. But it is increasingly difficult to design and deliver a reasonable set of courses that will enable students to fulfill the lower level requirements for the major (i.e. the "pre-major") at each receiving institution. The responses BCCAT received to the Block Transfer discussion paper clearly identified that *filling the requirements of the pre-major has become the single most problematic area of transfer for academic students.*

Some college faculty in their response to the Block Transfer Discussion Paper noted the power imbalance between sending and receiving institutions. Colleges autonomy is illusory, they said, since it is "subsumed" by the "superior" autonomy enjoyed by the university, and by a transfer process

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which allows the receiving institution to set the rules. Other college faculty pointed out that the reactive role assigned to the sending institution inhibits the flexibility to offer unique and different courses, or to implement innovative approaches. They feel that their contributions are valued only as deliverers of a university-dictated curriculum, not as true partners in the enterprise of designing and teaching their discipline. They are aware that for transfer students a paramount concern must always be the *transferability* of a course, not just the relevance or intrinsic interest of the content.

Lack of consultation or advance warning regarding changes in curriculum or in program requirements can create serious difficulties for sending institutions and their students, especially when more than one receiving institution is making those changes. One such type of change is "upper division creep." For example, a university college may find it convenient to renumber its second year business courses to 300 or 400 level, as part of a new business degree. Although the courses may remain substantially unchanged the fact that they are now "upper division" may make transfer more difficult.

The Student Perspective

Students vary widely in their understanding of the transfer system, and their ability to navigate successfully through the process. In a recent study of students who transferred from a college to a university, some described the process "a piece of cake" while others confessed to being mystified. The lack of planning evident in the remarks of some students, their passive assumptions that "someone" will guide them, their failure to inform themselves about the transfer process (e.g., what a transcript is) is troubling. Undoubtedly many students are responsible for their transfer difficulties. However, other stories illustrate that even students attempting to do all the right things run afoul of regulations that are difficult, even impossible, to research in advance.

It can be intimidating, particularly for first generation college students, to read and interpret calendars and to decide on a program of studies. Students may not be comfortable with or have access to the technology used in registration, admissions and transfer procedures. Many students feel powerless to question, appeal or protest in the face of the au-

thority of a Registrar's Office or a dense official tome of unfamiliar academic rules.

Here are some of the difficulties students have related:

- Obtaining good advice.
- Finding information in a user-friendly format.
- The enormous impact that changing their mind about destination or program can have on a progression of studies.
- Understanding the "system." Many students expect a coordinated system of post-secondary education (like the K-12 system) where institutions will have similar regulations, curricula, programs, etc.
- Transfer shock. A complex of experiences that students undergo upon initial transfer, often manifesting itself in a drop in grade point average. Severe academic discouragement and social isolation forces some students to drop out.
- Having to 'repeat' courses. Institutional justification for requiring students to repeat content they feel they have already mastered is generally lost on students, who merely feel that they have been forced to waste their time.
- Excess credits. For various reasons, students may take more credits at a college than they are permitted to transfer to their degree.
- Credits transfer but not all can be applied to the degree program. This is common.
- Differing credit values for the same courses. A five credit college course may transfer to a three credit university course.
- Grade conversion. Transfer students' grades are converted to the receiving institution's scale, and their GPA recalculated. Some institutions use the lowest end of a grade range for the conversion, or a significantly lower percentage equivalent for each grade. Transfer students applying to highly competitive programs often feel they victimized by such practices.
- Letter of permission. Once a student has transferred to a university, he/she must seek permission to take courses elsewhere. Unaware, some students have been denied credit for college course taken after enrolling in a university program.

FILLING THE REQUIREMENTS of the pre-major has become the single most problematic area of transfer for academic students

The System Perspective

The word "system" has to be applied carefully to our collection of autonomous institutions and supporting agencies. This loose structure has important benefits and strengths, but it presents significant challenges for student mobility.

A relatively new problem for the system relates to the changing expectation of students and the public about what *ought to be* transferable. In 1995 and 1996, 14,000 B.C. students chose to continue their education after "leaving" a college program. Almost a third of these students came from programs not designed for university transfer (UT). While the total number of non-UT students trying to transfer credit is small relative to UT students, these figures point to a growing trend in BC for students in applied programs to continue their education.

Lack of capacity in the system to accommodate students in degree programs can create another problem. For example, few students enrolled in fine arts diploma programs can transfer to degree programs at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, which cannot accept more students than their studio space allows. Another manifestation of a capacity problem is the difficulty some transfer students encounter enrolling in courses they need.

Accrediting agencies external to institutions have in many cases the power to set curricular requirements which can affect transfer relationships between institutions. For example, students who wish to become B.C. teachers must be aware of a complicated set of rules and regulations established by the B.C. College of Teachers, over and above degree requirements. Guidelines and regulations for transfer to the accounting designations (CGA, CMA, etc.) may differ from those that students must follow for inter-institutional transfer.

Summary

The answer to the question "So what is the problem?" appears to encompass four main aspects of the transfer system.

1. **Complexity.** The context for transfer has changed considerably in the last ten years, and our system has been slow to accommodate those changes. We must design ways to make transfer more flexible and less complicated, and to involve articulation committees in identifying and resolving transfer barriers in their disciplines.
2. **Communication.** We need to increase efforts to help students become more sophisticated planners of their own post-secondary programs. Clear accessible information in user friendly formats is essential.
3. **Administration.** Some problems with the transfer system undoubtedly lie in its administration. Addressing process- or administrative-related issues through such bodies as the Task Force on Standards and Processes will help over time to smooth transfer processes and remove inequities.
4. **Articulation.** Flexible transfer agreements which allow more curricular freedom at sending institutions, speedy resolution of articulation disputes, and sensitivity at all receiving institutions to the effect curricular changes have on sending institutions are all strategies which will address articulation-related transfer problems.

A number of BCCAT projects are currently underway, aimed at addressing problems with the transfer system identified in this paper.

Conclusion

Since the system works well, it could be argued that focusing on transfer problems can lead to the wrong conclusion that major repair is necessary. But it is perilous to deny, ignore or minimize problems. The result can be frustration and loss of credibility on the part of the users of our system and the public at large, as well as missed opportunities to fix those problems.

A number of BCCAT projects are currently underway, aimed at addressing problems with the transfer system identified in this paper. Future newsletters will report on the progress of those initiatives.

BRITISH COLUMBIA COUNCIL ON ADMISSIONS & TRANSFER

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